

A letter from Rabbi Aaron Melman to all CBS congregants

Dear Friends,

It has been a very interesting day. Arriving late last night I was immediately struck by the signs throughout Ben Gurion Airport pointing the way to the shelters. One becomes immediately aware of the reality of the situation. I have never seen those signs on any of my previous visits - not even when I came during the second Lebanon War. This is different as most of the country is affected due to the distance the rockets can travel.

I was able to take in some of the sights, sounds and yes, eats of Jerusalem this morning (I just love walking the streets here - I feel at home) but it is awfully quiet for the middle of the summer. It is very sad. Yes, it may have been late morning on a Monday, but there would normally be many more people on Ben Yehuda Street. Shopkeepers told us that the numbers of visitors are way down. My colleagues tell me that their flights from the States were half to seventy percent full. It is a reminder that we must not stop coming. We must continue to tell the people of Israel how much they mean to us and how much we care about them.

This afternoon I felt myself in awe. I remember when I was younger, marching with my father in downtown Toronto on behalf of Soviet Jewry and a man whose name I had never heard of before. Today, we had the distinct privilege to spend time with Natan Sharansky. Natan is the current head of the Jewish Agency for Israel. Natan told us that even when he was in the government they knew that Palestinians were building tunnels in Gaza and no foreign country wanted to believe them. It is a shame that nobody paid attention at the time. He reassured us that Aliyah flights are still arriving without a single cancellation and tomorrow over four hundred Jews from France will arrive on an Aliyah flight.

Over dinner this evening we heard from Yuval Steinitz, who serves as the Minister of Intelligence, International Relations and Strategic Affairs. He briefed us a bit on the situation and gave us details he could share. They believe that fifty percent of Hamas' weapons have been destroyed. Several tunnels have been destroyed with more to come. To achieve calm and security in the region he believes that the ground operation will have to be expanded and he fears that Gaza might need to be taken over by Israel once again in order to truly stop all the attacks which will only mean more casualties. Earlier today, Minister Steinitz visited wounded soldiers at Saroka Medical Center in Be'ersheva. He told us that not a single family complained about how or why their loved one was injured - truly believing in this operation. Most of the soldiers were anxious to get out of the hospital and get back to Gaza to continue the fight.

Tomorrow will be a very different day. We will head south to visit and bring strength and support to our Masorti communities in Ashkelon, Sderot, Be'ersheva and Omer. Yes, that is where many of the rockets have been fired. So why go? That is why we are here. They need us now more than ever and I am honored and humbled to be co-chairing such a mission that will bring this important message. I am truly honored to represent Congregation Beth Shalom and bring our prayers and good wishes to the communities here. Thank you for allowing me to be your shaliach, your emissary, on this sacred mission.

Laila Tov from Jerusalem.

Aaron